

Robot Masonry

by V.W. Bro. M.D. Jardine
Stonewall Lodge, September 25, 1996

Technology has reached the stage where robots, with computer generated voices and hydraulically precise arms, could handle much of what goes on in Lodge. They could open and close in word-perfect ritual, read minutes, correspondence and accounts and pass motions to approve, file, and pay the same. Committee reports could be given; requests for charity could be dealt with according to the custom of the Lodge. Degree Work would be given perfectly according to the book. Balloting would never result in a black ball. It would even be possible to duplicate robotically Brother A, who complains every single meeting about the escalating cost of producing the summons, and Brother B, who remarks at every single meeting that when he was initiated he had not even heard of a book.

We all know Masons who are striving to act like robot Masons. They jump on the brother who substitutes a synonym in the ritual, and praise the brother who rattles his work off perfectly, if you could only understand what he said. They make sure that each part of the each meeting is so exactly like the same part of the last meeting that each 37.2 minute long meeting is a carbon copy of the last 37.2 minute long meeting.¹

The qualities of a robot Mason include predictability, inflexibility, uniformity, formality, emotionlessness, and superficiality. Those brethren who aspire to these virtues should be warned: you can easily be replaced by a robot in a tux.

I would add to that list of qualities the following: tedious and boring. Who but a robot would want to go to a meeting of robots?

The qualities of a human Mason are the opposite of those of a robot and include unpredictability, spontaneity, variety, creativity, feeling and depth. I would also add "exciting" because a meeting which has those other qualities will also be exciting.

In a different variation of this particular lecture I would go on to encourage you to examine every aspect of your meetings: their time, place, format, the way you dress, the people you involve-- and to ask how you could minimize the robotic and maximize the human in each. I'll leave that thought with you.

Instead, since we are talking about the qualities of robot and human Masons I want to think about one of my favourite sentences from the work: "The internal and not the external qualifications of a man are what Masonry regards." I guess some people are trying to attain the internal qualifications of a robot. A robot has no internal qualifications at all--only external ones.

It is a peculiarity of all of the genuine Masons I have ever met that they are all inner-directed, relying on a light from within to define and guide their being. That reliance strengthens their internal qualifications and at the same time increases their

¹I once know a brother who reported for the sick and visiting committee every month in these words: "I don't know of any brethren who are on the sick list, and if anyone knows of one, would he put me wise." I heard these words so often they are engraved on my memory.

confidence. Self-confidence, together with the humility spawned by contemplation of the Almighty is the way to that true tolerance which is liberty. Confidence enables us to avoid being controlled by others and humility teaches us to avoid controlling others.

It is curious how many men who have these characteristics are attracted to the Craft, and how many who lack them are not. Not being measurable, it is not possible to produce statistics to prove this statement, but experience tends to confirm it.

On the other hand, a lack of self-confidence makes people seek their validation from without rather than from within. Social approbation, or the instruction of an all-knowing political or religious leader, takes the place of the internal confidence which would enable such people to move serenely through life. Of course, such leaders have a vested interest in promoting insecurity. Once someone has started to depend on an outside source for internal security, it becomes like a drug, and they will fight desperately against anything which would appear to threaten that source. Indeed drugs and alcohol do fulfil this role in the lives of many unfortunate people. A popular religious song contains the phrase, "[I'm] so afraid I've lost my faith"--this phrase demonstrates that for that person, faith was something external you could lose like a pair of gloves. The fear is real, but the faith is not.

It is, of course, those who want truth to be a simple formula, a matter of being programmed to push the right button, who lack the internal confidence to know where they stand and the humility to allow others to stand elsewhere. Intolerance and insecurity go hand in hand. And as a result it is these very people that are most uncomfortable with the Craft.

Perhaps no more searing denunciation of this kind of robot thinking can be found than in the movie Monty Python's Life of Brian. The unfortunate Brian, who has unintentionally been hailed as a prophet, tells the waiting multitude "you're all individuals!" "YES!" they shout in unison, "WE'RE ALL INDIVIDUALS!" "You've got to work it out for yourselves!" says Brian. "YES!" comes the response, "WE'VE GOT TO WORK IT OUT FOR OURSELVES!" And, after a moment, the crowd roars "TELL US MORE!"

Because their responses are programmed by an external source, the morality of such people is robotic. To a certain well-defined situation there is a well-defined response. If you push the right button you get the expected response. There is neither thought nor feeling involved--it is totally mechanical. I know of a couple who seriously went through the rigmarole of a wedding ceremony and separated before the honeymoon when the groom found his bride in a compromising position with the best man at the reception. Do you think she was reflecting on her vows as she said them, or was she repeating them mechanically?

Do you, do we behave the same way towards our Masonic ceremonies? Like the bride in the story, we all made certain commitments at the altar, but how well have we followed through with them? Have you failed to respond to a summons because it was easier and less painful to watch TV? Have you failed to come to the rescue of a Brother when others maligned him because it was easier to avoid being called down yourself? A commitment that is not followed through, like that of the married couple who didn't make

it to their honeymoon, is no commitment at all but another dead leaf drifting by on the stream of meaningless events which is the uncommitted person's life. Someone whose life is like that is living like a robot--is as alive as a robot. Our lives are built of the sum total of our commitments. If we have the Fortitude to carry through what we have undertaken to our spouses, children, employers, customers, friends, Lodge and, by no means least, our God then the superstructure of our lives is built high with our commitments. Masonry is a tool which might help those with a mechanical existence to "Get a Life" in this way.

"The internal and not the external qualifications of a man are what Masonry regards". If Masonry is, as I believe it to be, a celebration of humanity, those internal qualifications ought to be among the most human of our qualities. We should not be misled by images of Victorian rigidity when we call those qualifications "virtues". Real virtue is not robotic.